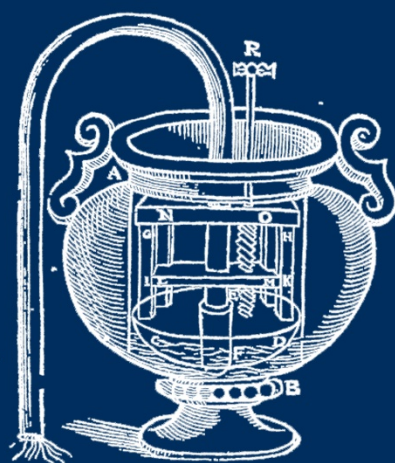


Designing a multiple case study approach for studying universities' community engagement



5/2025

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CNR-IRCrES Working Paper 5/2025



giugno 2025 by CNR-IRCrES

DESIGNING A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY APPROACH FOR STUDYING UNIVERSITIES' COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This working paper outlines the methodological design employed by PLACES (*Portraits and Landscapes of Academic Community Engagement Scholarship*), a PRIN 2022 project, that investigates science-society interactions through Community Engagement (CE) initiatives in higher education institutions across Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. Drawing on a multiple case study methodology, this project aims to explore how and why universities engage with their communities and examines the conditions that enable or constrain such initiatives and their transformative potential. PLACES integrates *macro*-, *meso*-, and *micro*-levels of analysis across three countries to address the complexity and context-dependency of CE practices, encompassing policy and systemic frameworks, institutional practices, and individual scholars' experiences. By investigating diverse institutional contexts and drawing from a combination of data sources including policy documents, quantitative indicators, and qualitative interviews, the project employs data triangulation to provide an in-depth investigation of the object of study. The cases selected by this study reflect different academic traditions and administrative models, offering a foundation for cross-national comparisons. Ultimately, by studying situated CE initiatives within broader systemic and institutional contexts, PLACES seeks to provide evidence-based insights for university managers, policymakers, and scholars and contributes to the ongoing debate on the role of universities as active agents of societal change in an evolving higher education landscape.

KEYWORDS: community engagement, universities, higher education, case study, multi-level study.

DOI: 10.23760/2421-7158.2025.005

ISSN (online): 2421-7158

HOW TO CITE

Spinello, A.O., Carazzolo, V., Finardi, U., Frongia, S., Ghibellini, V., Reale, E., Vargiu, A. (2025). *Designing a multiple case study approach for studying universities' community engagement* (CNR-IRCrES Working Paper 5/2025). Istituto di Ricerca sulla Crescita Economica Sostenibile. <http://dx.doi.org/10.23760/2421-7158.2025.005>

CONTENTS

1.	INTRODUCTION	3
2.	UNDERPINNINGS OF CASE STUDY RESEARCH	4
3.	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A BLURRED AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENT PHENOMENON	5
4.	THE PLACES PROJECT RESEARCH DESIGN	7
4.1.	Exploratory and comparative aim.....	8
4.2.	Research questions and propositions	9
4.3.	Selection of the cases.....	9
4.4.	Data collection strategy	11
5.	CONCLUSIONS	12
6.	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	13
7.	REFERENCES.....	14

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education policies increasingly emphasise the need to reshape the relationship between science and society through inclusive governance and collective responsibility within the framework of Public Engagement with Research (Bauer & Jensen, 2011). This shift calls for public dialogue and greater citizen involvement in research and innovation through meaningful initiatives to produce socially and economically relevant scientific outcomes (Higgins et al., 2024). The term *public engagement* refers to the various ways in which universities actively involve non-academic stakeholders in their research and educational activities. These initiatives aim to strengthen the relationship between universities and the communities they serve (NCCPE, 2024). By fostering interactions and collaboration with communities, universities can achieve significant social and economic outcomes that go beyond traditional academic goals (Breznitz & Feldman, 2012).

The PRIN 2022 PLACES (*Portraits and Landscapes of Academic Community Engagement Scholarship*) project, led by University of Sassari and CNR, was conceived to explore how these interactions develop at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels across diverse higher education contexts¹. PLACES aims to improve the understanding of how universities and communities can effectively work together and seeks to identify the factors that foster or hinder the success of these efforts. Central to this project is the analysis of *transformative changes* that arise from the evolving relationship between academia and society, leading to significant and enduring effects. Notably, the project focuses on a peculiar form of engagement, i.e. *Community Engagement (CE)* initiatives, defined by collaborative efforts between academic professionals and non-academic stakeholders, grounded in reciprocity and symmetrical, participatory relationships. Within this framework, *transformative CE* is understood as the capacity to empower social actors and promote sustainable societal change while also prompting universities to reconfigure their institutional structures and strategic orientations. By investigating the successes and challenges that universities face in their CE efforts, this research aims to add valuable insights into the effectiveness of engagement practices in higher education.

This working paper describes the methodological design employed by the PLACES project to explore CE across Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. This research employs a *multiple case study approach* that weaves together *macro*-, *meso*-, and *micro*-levels of analysis. Through this approach, it seeks to capture *how* and *why* universities located in these three countries engage with their communities and to identify the conditions that foster or inhibit the transformative potential of such initiatives. This design aligns with Yin's (2003) framework for case study research applied to complex, context-dependent social phenomena.

The remainder of this working paper is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical and epistemological foundations of case study research, emphasising when this approach is most appropriate and indicating its inherent limitations. Section 3 defends the pertinence of the case study approach to a blurred and context-dependent phenomenon, such as CE, and presents the operational definition adopted by the project. Section 4 delves into the overall research design of the PLACES project, detailing its exploratory and comparative aims through a multi-level strategy, clarifying the criteria used for case selection, outlining the main research questions and related propositions, and describing the data collection strategy. Finally, Section 5 concludes by reflecting on how the conceptual and contextual complexity of CE can be effectively addressed through a case study approach, and provide valuable research outcomes².

¹ PLACES project description is available on the OSF platform: <https://osf.io/ytv37/metadata/osf>

² Although the work is the result of the authors' joint effort, the contributions have been distributed as follows. Section 1: Spinello, Reale, Finardi; Section 2: Carazzolo, Spinello, Vargiu; Section 3: Vargiu, Reale, Carazzolo; Sections 4, 4.2, and 4.4: all authors have contributed equally; Sections 4.1 and 4.3: Frongia, Ghibellini; Section 5: Vargiu, Frongia, Ghibellini.

2. UNDERPINNINGS OF CASE STUDY RESEARCH

The case study research approach is designed to provide an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena or specific subjects within their context, often characterised by blurred conceptual boundaries, considering the perspectives of the participants involved (Gustafsson, 2012; Glette & Wiig, 2022). It is typically performed by utilising multiple data sources, mainly qualitative (interviews, reports, archives, and other documents) and quantitative (e.g. surveys), offering a comprehensive perspective on one or more phenomena under investigation.

Although the available literature may appear somewhat unclear in thoroughly defining a case study (Gustafsson, 2012), there is broad agreement on the case study method's unique ability to provide a holistic understanding of complex phenomena by considering multiple variables and factors within their real-world context. Gagnon (2010) posits that the case study approach is particularly effective because of its ability to illuminate processes and shared meanings within a specific context. This approach is especially valuable for describing phenomena within their social contexts, exploring and illustrating specific issues through an analytical framework, or conducting a meta-evaluation (Baxter & Jack, 2008). It allows for the consideration of multiple variables and contextual conditions, rendering it more suitable than quantitative methods for certain research types. A comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation is ultimately achieved through triangulation of findings collected across various data collection phases (Gerring, 2006).

In summary, the case study approach is particularly advantageous when research seeks to explore how and why questions (Lavarda & Bellucci, 2022), especially in contexts where participant behaviour cannot be manipulated. Furthermore, it is particularly well suited for research that seeks to explain complex causal relationships in real-life events that are difficult to capture only through quantitative methods.

The case study methodology is rooted in both constructivist and interpretivist traditions despite their distinctions as separate epistemological frameworks. Within the constructivist framework, reality is constructed through interactions and relationships that individuals establish with one another (Hagedorn, 1983). This perspective underscores the subjective construction of meaning, while acknowledging certain elements of objectivity. This epistemological foundation is closely aligned with the case study approach, which aims to understand how people and groups experience, interpret, and construct complex realities. From this perspective, the case study approach aims to comprehensively illustrate the cognitive processes, beliefs, and socially constructed dynamics that underpin the interconnected aspects of the case or process being examined (Stake, 1995).

Interpretivism is an epistemological approach that emphasises the importance of deeply understanding the perspectives of persons involved in the process being studied (Carter, 2020). From this viewpoint, the researcher's role is to interpret and convey social reality through the lived experiences of the participants (Travis, 1999). The qualitative nature of the case study approach, coupled with its ability to integrate diverse sources and research strategies, allows researchers to engage deeply with the social context under examination. This approach allows researchers to integrate insights from various empirical phases to capture interpretations of complex social phenomena. Nevertheless, the adoption of interpretivism as an epistemological paradigm has been subject to criticism, as its underlying assumptions are frequently perceived as excessively subjective, potentially undermining the internal and external validity of the research findings (Cohen et al., 2007).

While the literature presents a diverse array of definitions for various types of case studies, scholars generally concur that the most straightforward method for categorisation is to differentiate between *single* and *multiple case studies* (Gustafsson, 2012; Yin, 2003). This distinction represents a fundamental decision for researchers who have chosen to employ a case study approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

A *single case study* focuses on an in-depth examination of one case, which may be defined, according to the available literature, as a "complex, specific, functioning thing" (Stake, 1995), a "contemporary phenomenon" (Yin, 1981), or an individual, a group of people, or an organisation

(Hays, 2003). Single case studies are particularly suitable when the researcher aims to explore a phenomenon in great detail, providing a comprehensive and focused description. They are often employed when the goal is to thoroughly investigate the case at hand, especially when research seeks to generate a robust theory (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). This approach is also commonly employed in studies focusing on individuals or groups. Single case studies are particularly favoured when the phenomenon being examined constitutes a unique or typical instance, a revelatory case, or a longitudinal study (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

A *multiple case study* approach involves the simultaneous analysis of several cases with the aim of identifying both commonalities and differences (Gustafsson, 2012). Evidence derived from multiple case studies is generally regarded as more robust and reliable than evidence obtained from single case studies (Baxter & Jack, 2008). However, multiple case studies are significantly more time-consuming and typically require a larger team of researchers to manage the scope of the work effectively.

Another important decision for researchers prior to planning and designing a case study is to choose the case study type that most effectively aligns with their specific research objectives. Yin (2003) differentiates between three types of case studies: *explanatory*, which aim to clarify causal relationships between interventions and outcomes; *exploratory*, which investigate cases where certain features remain unclear; and *descriptive*, which focus on providing a detailed portrayal of an intervention or phenomenon within its context. Stake (1995) offered an alternative categorisation, differentiating between *intrinsic* case studies, which focus on an in-depth examination of a specific case without the intent to develop or infer theory; *instrumental* case studies, which contribute to theoretical understanding by using specific cases as a means to illustrate broader principles; and *collective* case studies, where multiple cases are studied to gain comparative insights.

When adopting the case study approach for a specific research purpose, it is essential to weigh both its strengths and limitations. One of the primary advantages of case studies is their strong internal validity, which can be achieved through the sustained observation and triangulation of multiple data sources. However, external validity remains a key limitation, as the findings from case studies are often difficult to generalise beyond the specific context under investigation unless robust triangulation with evidence from other studies is provided (Gerring, 2007). Considering these methodological limitations, researchers should be aware that case studies are generally less appropriate for statistical generalisation (Kennedy, 1979).

3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A BLURRED AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENT PHENOMENON

The PLACES project aims to explore how universities and communities build collaborative relationships that lead to impactful outcomes for both academia and society, with a particular focus on their transformative potential. A primary objective of this project is to examine both the limiting and facilitating factors that shape these collaborations across diverse institutional and national settings.

In recent decades, as universities have been increasingly tasked with fulfilling their "third mission" of societal engagement alongside their traditional roles in teaching and research, a variety of related terms have emerged within both academic discourse and institutional practice. The widespread circulation of expressions such as *civic engagement*, *public engagement*, *community-university partnerships*, *knowledge transfer*, and *community engagement* reflects a growing recognition of the university's role in addressing societal challenges in collaboration with non-academic stakeholders. Within this broader landscape, PLACES posits a strong focus on *community engagement* as a form of collaboration grounded in reciprocity, participation, and balanced relationships between academic institutions and external actors (Vargiu, 2014). However, the conceptual boundaries between CE, public engagement, and the third mission are often fluid and overlapping, as highlighted in both the academic literature and policy documents (Marino et al., 2019). This overlap makes it difficult to isolate CE as a clearly distinct phenomenon. Compounding this complexity, engagement practices exhibit considerable variation

contingent on the cultural, disciplinary, and policy contexts in which they are implemented (Shalowitz et al., 2009; Watermeyer & Lewis, 2018; Bonollo et al., 2022).

Our analytical framework intentionally centres on what we term 'transformative CE' as an aspirational model, focusing on this ideal type (Weber, 1958) precisely because it represents a distinct – albeit niche – form of engagement and because it establishes clear conceptual boundaries that distinguish transformative CE from broader categories of public engagement and third mission activities. By examining instances where universities do achieve or approximate these ideals, we can identify the conditions that enable such transformative relationships and provide a normative benchmark against which current practices can be evaluated and improved.

Addressing this complexity necessitated specific decisions at both methodological and theoretical levels.

From a methodological point of view, this complexity and contextual variability are among the main reasons why we considered that the case study approach is particularly well suited to the PLACES project. CE is not a standardised or uniform practice; it is embedded in a local context, shaped, and defined by specific actors, institutional cultures, and societal needs. Case studies enable researchers to closely examine these dynamics and capture the richness and specificity of engagement as it occurs in different contexts.

By providing access to diverse actors' perspectives and capturing the process-oriented and participatory nature of CE initiatives, a case study approach can elucidate the mechanisms (*how*) and rationale (*why*) of certain strategies are carried out and succeed or fall short in producing meaningful outcomes. This is especially relevant for PLACES, which seeks to understand the transformative changes that CE can generate both within universities and communities.

Furthermore, significant advancements in the comprehension of collaboration, co-production, and academic-societal partnerships are contingent on the integration of diverse datasets and information derived from quantitative indicators (on the engagement initiatives), documental analysis (on the engagement strategies and culture), and interviews with university personnel (engagement professionals and engaged scholars). This process of data triangulation is intended to illuminate the perspectives of various stakeholders and elucidate the discrepancies between established objectives and actual practices.

Ultimately, the case study approach offers much more than descriptive insight. It connects theory and practice, enabling researchers to test and refine key concepts, such as co-production, empowerment, and social impact in real-world settings. Within the PLACES project, it serves not only as a research tool but also as a lens through which the transformative power of CE can be critically examined and better understood.

To effectively implement our research within this methodological framework, it was essential to establish a working definition of CE based on robust theoretical assumptions.

As previously indicated, while recognising the conceptual overlaps that occur in practice, PLACES employs an operational definition of CE as a reference to delineate a specific subset of university-society interactions under examination. According to Vargiu's conceptualisation (2014), which differentiates CE from the broader third mission and general public engagement activities, CE is characterised by distinctive features. These features enable the identification of initiatives within the broader spectrum of university-society interactions and pertain to reciprocity, symmetrical relationships, participatory mechanisms, and emancipatory interests.

Reciprocity is characterised by adherence to principles such as "respect, trust, genuine commitment, balancing power, sharing resources and clear communication" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 247). As outlined by Dostilio et al. (2012), reciprocity can be manifested through three distinct orientations: exchange, influence, and generatively oriented reciprocity, all of which emphasise mutual benefit and co-creation between academic and non-academic partners in community-based initiatives.

Symmetrical relationships are characterised by balanced power dynamics that eschew hierarchical structures. These relationships are characterised by an equitable distribution of power, mutual recognition of expertise, and reciprocal knowledge exchange between partners. As Saltmarsh et al. (2009) assert, such relationships "require academics to accept that knowledge and expertise are located outside as well as inside the academy, and that both are essential to

addressing societal problems” (p. 11). This perspective transforms traditional power imbalances by acknowledging diverse forms of knowledge and establishing collaborative decision-making processes.

Participatory mechanisms are structured processes and methodological approaches that facilitate meaningful stakeholder engagement throughout research and CE initiatives. These mechanisms are designed to create inclusive environments, in which diverse perspectives can contribute to problem definition, research design, implementation, and evaluation. Cornwall (2008, p. 275) characterizes effective participatory mechanisms as “processes that open spaces for involving those who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, enabling people to realize their rights to participate in and influence decisions that affect their lives”. These mechanisms extend beyond tokenism or consultation to substantive involvement, which influences outcomes and equitably distributes benefits among participants.

Emancipatory interests, as conceptualised by Mezirow and Taylor’s transformative learning theory, aim to liberate communities from restrictive social structures through collaborative action. These interests underpin community partnerships that critically analyse power dynamics and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, thereby fostering more inclusive and reflective perspectives among all stakeholders. In the context of community-engaged work, this orientation prioritises collective transformation, striving to cultivate a critical consciousness that empowers communities to exercise greater agency in addressing systemic challenges and pursuing social justice (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).

4. THE PLACES PROJECT RESEARCH DESIGN

The PLACES project employs a *multiple* and *multi-level* case study methodology with a comparative approach (Figure 1). Triangulation of data and information collected across various levels of analysis is expected to enhance the overall robustness of the study’s findings.

A *macro level* focuses on comprehending the systemic features of the three selected countries on which universities perform CE initiatives. The objective is to provide an overview of national higher education systems and the broader contextual conditions shaping universities’ engagement activities. This level serves to frame the study by offering an understanding of the political and socioeconomic contexts within which these initiatives are implemented. This includes the study of indicators related to national higher education systems (e.g. national investment levels in R&D, higher education system structure, general statistics on the research workforce, and higher education attainment rates), societal attitudes toward science, and key aspects of national frameworks for universities’ engagement (e.g. legislative provisions, independent bodies supporting engagement initiatives, funding opportunities, and evaluation mechanisms for engagement activities).

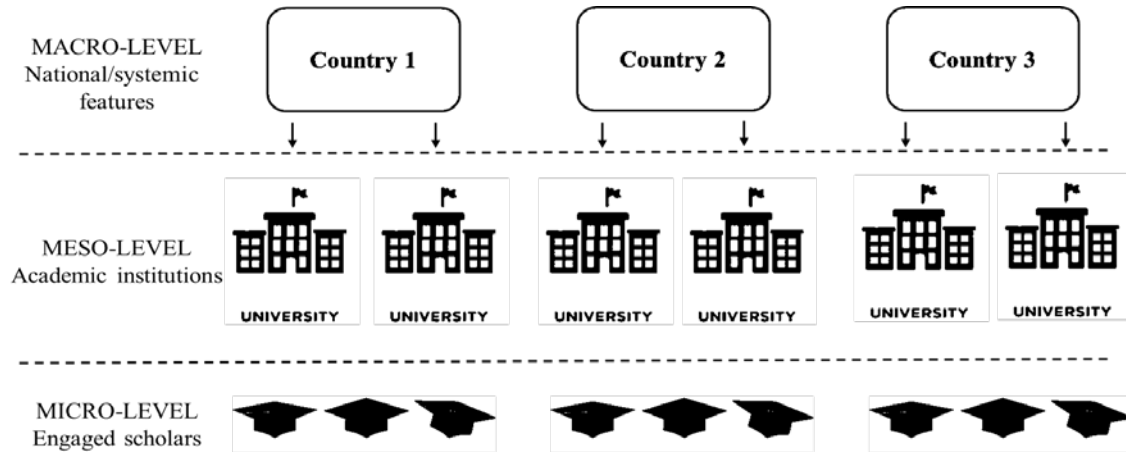
A *meso (institutional) level* examines specific academic institutions from selected countries as units of analysis. The selected universities will be examined as “functioning systems” (Stake, 1995), with their general approach to CE shaped by their interaction with the socio-economic context in which they are embedded. The aim is to provide detailed background information on these institutions, establishing a foundation for understanding the conditions under which engaged scholars undertake CE initiatives. This level explores universities’ institutional practices, including their strategic capacity and organizational frameworks for public and CE (e.g. dedicated offices or roles), the integration of engagement practices as a core principle within strategic plans, financial incentives supporting these activities, universities’ relationships with local external actors, and their embeddedness in the surrounding socio-economic context. Positioned between national policy frameworks and individual scholarly experiences, this level will be referred to as the *meso-level*.

Finally, a *micro level* will focus on individual cases of prominent community-engaged scholars from the selected universities, offering an in-depth perspective on the practical implementation of engagement initiatives as experienced by those directly working in the field. The ethnosociological approach combines life histories and narrative methods to capture scholars’

personal perspectives, complemented by the collection and analysis of qualitative documentation such as archival records, personal notes, and other relevant materials.

The *macro-* and *meso-level* analyses form the foundation of the *Landscapes* research stream within the project, coordinated by the CNR unit, while the *micro-level* analysis, called *Portraits*, is led by the principal investigator's team at the University of Sassari.

Figure 1. The multiple and multi-level case study approach employed by the PLACES project



4.1. Exploratory and comparative aim

The investigation is fundamentally concerned with *how* questions – specifically, how universities implement CE initiatives and why certain conditions facilitate or hinder these efforts. As noted by Yin (2003), case studies are particularly well-suited to address such questions. To address the research questions that the project aims to explore, the case study can be classified as an *exploratory case study* (following Yin's categorisation, 2003) and assumes a comparative approach.

The exploratory stance acknowledges the conceptual ambiguity associated with CE and its implementation within higher education institutions. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, we aim to uncover the complex interplay of factors that shape CE practices across different contexts.

The comparative approach provides significant analytical advantages by elucidating similarities and differences across national systems and institutional cases. Through the systematic comparison of CE practices, policies, and perspectives across the selected universities and countries, we can identify:

- Common challenges and enablers that transcend national boundaries;
- System-specific factors that shape distinctive CE approaches;
- Transferable practices that might be adapted across contexts;
- Contextual contingencies that require localised solutions.

This comparative dimension is particularly valuable given the culturally embedded nature of CE practices (Bonollo et al., 2022). By examining how different universities interpret and implement CE principles within their specific contexts, we can develop nuanced theoretical insights into the conditions that foster CE. Furthermore, the comparative approach allows us to explore the influence of different evaluation mechanisms and incentive structures across different systems. This is particularly relevant given the increasing emphasis on assessing and rewarding universities' societal impact in many European countries.

It is important to clarify that the purpose of the study is not to achieve statistical generalization of findings to a broader population, but rather to develop analytical generalizations through theoretical propositions about CE practices. These analytical generalizations aim to provide

conceptual insights that can inform understanding across different contexts, while still acknowledging contextual specificities. This approach aligns with the inherent strengths of case study methodology, which prioritizes depth and contextual understanding over statistical representativeness (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

4.2. Research questions and propositions

For the purposes of the PLACES project, case studies are devoted to investigating *why and how* universities develop CE, considering the transformative effects produced, checking for contextual factors, and reasons for the lack of efficiency in the implementation of activities. Against the backdrop of our operational, “radical” definition of CE we explore the extent to which it becomes embedded (or fails to become embedded) in institutional settings. A key analytical objective is to identify factors signaling institutional resistance or receptiveness to change, as emphasized in exchanges with the with the project’s Advisory Board.

The research at the three levels is guided by the following main research questions and associated propositions:

RQ1 (at the macro level): How are systemic factors within higher education in a country most likely to foster conducive environments for CE?

- *Proposition 1:* higher education systems that incorporate explicit engagement goals into policy frameworks and funding schemes, and where engagement activities are formally recognised and rewarded, are more likely to foster conducive environments for CE.

RQ2 (at the meso level): Why do universities develop CE? How can universities institutionalise participatory approaches to foster sustained dialogue with non-academic stakeholders to generate transformative effects?

- *Proposition 2:* the institutionalisation of participatory approaches to CE is influenced by diverse conceptualisations and practices across institutional contexts, shaping how engagement is integrated into the university mission and generating varying models of transformative dialogue with non-academic stakeholders.

RQ3 (at the micro level): In what ways do the perspectives and experiences of highly engaged scholars contribute to our comprehension of the facilitators and obstacles to transformative CE?

- *Proposition 3a:* scholars’ personal motivations, values, and life courses, along with professional experiences, career trajectories, and scientific networks, significantly influence their engagement practices, often transcending institutional frameworks.

- *Proposition 3b:* disciplinary cultures and norms mediate how scholars interpret and implement CE principles.

4.3. Selection of the cases

Given different levels of analysis, the PLACES project employs a multiple case study approach across Western Europe, examining CE practices in selected universities situated within three distinct higher education systems: two countries from continental Europe with significant similarities in university traditions (France and Italy), and one country (the United Kingdom) from the Anglo-Saxon tradition of higher education (Bleiklie, 2014; Bleiklie et al., 2017).

The multiple case study approach allows an in-depth contextual examination of CE phenomena within real-world settings, enabling both within-case analysis in the same country and cross-case comparison between different countries. This methodological framework allows for the identification of contextual variables that impact engagement practices, and aids in the development of theoretical propositions through the recognition of patterns across diverse institutional environments.

Consequently, the study encompasses six universities from the three countries selected through purposive sampling, enabling robust comparative analysis while maintaining a manageable scope for in-depth investigation. The selection criteria encompassed several dimensions.

- *Institutional size.* All selected institutions are medium to large organisations classified as general research universities, ensuring a degree of comparability while maintaining diversity in institutional profiles.
- *Institutional characteristics.* The sample includes universities with diverse institutional profiles that balance both research and teaching missions, allowing the project to explore how these comprehensive institutional approaches shape engagement with communities.
- *Academic traditions.* The universities were selected based on their distinct administrative approaches and organizational structures within their respective higher education systems, providing comparative insights into how different institutional traditions shape CE practices
- *Geographic diversity.* The selections deliberately include universities located in countries with varying levels of economic and social development, enabling an analysis of how regional contexts influence CE practices.

Through a systematic analysis of heterogeneous cases, this research aims to develop theoretical frameworks regarding the determinants of effective CE in higher education across diverse European contexts.

In France, the selection of *University “FR1”* and *University “FR2”*³ provides a contrast in terms of institutional age, focus, and regional context:

- *University “FR1”*, located in Northern France, is a recently established university (through merger) with a specific thematic focus on urban issues, transportation, and sustainable development, domains that naturally align with CE. The university counts between 15,000 and 20,000 enrolled students.
- *University “FR2”*, located in southwestern France is a comprehensive institution that serves a diverse region characterised by significant socioeconomic challenges, which provide a different context for examining engagement practices. The university counts between 50,000 and 55,000 enrolled students.

In Italy, one university from the north and one from the south were selected for the analysis. This north-south comparison facilitates the examination of how divergent socioeconomic contexts influence engagement strategies.

- *University “IT1”*, located in Northern Italy, exemplifies a university in an industrially developed region characterised by economic indicators, potentially offering more diverse partnership opportunities and resources for engagement. The university counts between 75,000 and 80,000 enrolled students.
- *University “IT2”* is located in a Southern region facing relevant socioeconomic challenges, where CE may address more urgent social needs, albeit with potentially limited resources. The university counts between 35,000 and 40,000 enrolled students.

Both institutions operate within Italy’s higher education framework but exhibit different approaches to interpreting and implementing CE in their specific contexts.

The investigation also encompasses the United Kingdom, which represents the Anglo-Saxon tradition (Bleiklie, 2014; Bleiklie et al., 2017). Within this context, universities operate with considerable institutional autonomy, notwithstanding increasing marketisation pressures. The selected case studies within this country offer a comparative analysis of different institutional approaches within the more developed public engagement landscape of the UK.

- *University “UK1”*, located in central England, is a large, comprehensive research university with an established social responsibility strategy and extensive regional partnerships. The university counts between 45,000 and 50,000 enrolled students.
- *University “UK2”*, located in southwestern England, presents a distinctive institutional profile as a research-intensive university with a strong civic mission and a tradition of public engagement, providing fertile ground for diverse and innovative approaches to CE. The university counts between 30,000 and 35,000 enrolled students.

³ The universities selected as case studies are presented anonymously for the purposes of this paper. Approximate student enrollment figures for the 2023-2024 academic year are also provided to contextualize institutional scale.

Both institutions operate within the UK's framework, where impact and engagement have been more explicitly incentivised through mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). However, they represent different institutional responses to such incentives.

This case study selection strategy facilitates the examination of how the interaction between various institutional characteristics and diverse national frameworks influences CE practices. Although these cases may not be considered statistically representative, they can provide valuable comparative material for theory building around the conditions that facilitate transformative CE.

4.4. Data collection strategy

At the *macro level*, the study draws on a set of indicators reflecting key country-level characteristics that may influence the potential for public engagement in higher education. These indicators can be grouped into five macro-dimensions: (i) national investment in R&D; (ii) accessibility of higher education and availability of skilled human resources; (iii) institutional autonomy; and (iv) public attitudes toward science. Data for these indicators were sourced from EUROSTAT, OECD, the European University Association, and Eurobarometer. In addition, a documentary analysis is conducted to examine national strategies and drivers of universities' engagement across some areas like national engagement policies and support structures, funding opportunities, and mechanisms for reporting and evaluation. Data is collected from institutional websites, official documents, and the EFIL dataset (from the RISIS research infrastructure)⁴. To organise this information systematically, country fact sheets were developed as working tools, allowing for a structured comparative analysis across the three countries. Preliminary insights from these fact sheets (Carazzolo et al., 2024) informed the subsequent stages of the research and contributed to identifying key trends and patterns. Finally, a series of ten *semi-structured interviews* were conducted with national universities' engagement experts from Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. The interviewees are representatives from research evaluation agencies, organisations active in promoting universities' engagement, officials from research funding bodies, and ministry representatives responsible for science-society dialogue.

At the *meso level* (that of the selected academic institutions), the study conducts a comprehensive documentary analysis to investigate multiple dimensions of CE within each university. In addition, it extracts quantitative data from the ETER dataset, part of the RISIS research infrastructure⁵, to support comparative analysis. The data collection will focus on institutional background and governance structures, including the history of the university and its organizational configuration. Particular attention is given to strategic frameworks for CE, the presence of dedicated managerial roles, and how these dimensions are integrated into institutional policies, such as the university's Strategic Plan and Third Mission initiatives. The study also examines support structures for CE, including funding opportunities, training programs, and outreach activities. Further areas of analysis include mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, and community feedback, the use of social media and online platforms for engagement, and the presence of publicly accessible datasets or repositories documenting engagement practices. The research strategy also includes *semi-structured interviews* based on an interview outline designed to operationalise key dimensions related to public engagement approaches, trends, and practices through open-ended questions. These take the form of *thematically focused expert interviews* (Trinczek, 2009), characterised by an argumentative and discursive style, with the possibility of incorporating narrative elements. The interviews will explore several core themes: the definition and understanding of CE within the specific university context; the presence (or absence) of a strategic framework guiding engagement initiatives; available support structures, funding schemes, and academic programs related to engagement; the main motivations driving

⁴ EFIL (*European dataset of public R&D funding instruments*) is a database storing quantitative data and qualitative information on research funding instruments offered at the national level in European countries (Spinello et al., 2023). The database is part of RISIS, the European Research Infrastructure for Science and Innovation policy Studies.

⁵ ETER (*European Tertiary Education Register*) is a source of qualitative and quantitative data on higher education institutions in Europe, including their basic characteristics, educational activities, staff, finances and research activities.

universities to promote CE; and the challenges encountered in implementing such activities. Additionally, the interviews will examine the role of departments, research groups, and key individuals in fostering a university-wide culture of engagement, as well as the influence of best practices. Finally, the perceived transformative impact of CE initiatives – both on the community and the university itself – is assessed.

At the *micro level*, the study employs in-depth interviews with prominent engaged scholars from the selected universities (varying numbers per university, depending on the saturation principle). The interviews adopt a life history and ethnosociological approach to explore the interviewees' personal motivations and career trajectories, their experiences in implementing CE initiatives, the facilitators and obstacles they encountered, and their reflections on what constitutes transformative CE. The ethnosociological approach does not delve into interviewees' internal worlds instead, it focuses on what surrounds them – the contexts about which they possess practical knowledge acquired through direct experience. Life histories can be characterised as “practice narratives” (Bertaux, 1976), which are intimately linked to actions situated in real contexts (Olagnero, 2004). This methodological approach is theoretically grounded in Ricoeur's philosophy (1986), which posits a profound affinity between action and narrative: action unfolds over time and narrative constitutes the optimal form to capture and describe it. The ethnosociological perspective employs “field studies” (Bertaux, 1998; Bichi, 1999) to elucidate social patterns within a given context, which may also manifest in analogous environments. The importance of this approach lies in its ability to bridge micro and macro levels of social reality, providing rich contextual understanding while allowing for theoretical generalisation. By referring to the lived experiences of participants within their social contexts, the ethnosociological approach explores the complex interplay between individual agency and social structures, offering insights that purely quantitative or decontextualised approaches cannot achieve. The methodology employs ethnographic techniques, advancing from specific instances to broader generalisations, wherein the prefix “ethno” facilitates the establishment of connections between various social worlds and their respective subcultures. The interviews will be supplemented by the collection and analysis of documentary outputs from the involved scholars, such as project reports, media coverage of their initiatives, and personal reflections on engagement practices.

The triangulation of data across these three levels is expected to provide a comprehensive empirical foundation to address the aforementioned research questions. By integrating multiple sources and perspectives, we aim to cultivate a nuanced understanding of the interactions among macro-level policies, meso-level structures, and micro-level practices and experiences in shaping transformative CE.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This working paper has presented a structured methodological approach to explore transformative CE practices across Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, employing a *multiple case study design* that weaves together *macro*-, *meso*-, and *micro*-levels of analysis.

Studying CE presents several methodological challenges, which this research design attempts to address. First, it tackles the conceptual ambiguity associated with CE by adopting clear operational definitions, utilising Vargiu's (2014) framework while remaining attentive to contextual variations. Second, it acknowledges the complexity of interactions between universities and society by incorporating multiple levels and sources of data, consistent with Stake's (1995) perspective on studying “functioning systems”. Third, it adopts a comparative lens to discern both common patterns and context-specific features that characterise effective engagement practices across different institutional and national settings.

The cases selected for this study reflect diverse academic traditions, contrasting the Napoleonic administrative models of Italy and France with the Anglo-Saxon approach prevalent in the United Kingdom (Bleiklie, 2014; Bleiklie et al., 2017). This comparative dimension enhances the analysis by acknowledging the culture-dependent nature of CE (Bonollo et al., 2022) while also aiming to derive insights that may be applicable to different contexts.

By employing a carefully designed methodological framework, the PLACES project aims to substantially contribute to the existing body of literature on CE in higher education. First, it aims to advance theoretical discourse by examining the conditions that support transformative engagement in diverse settings, thereby refining our comprehension of how universities can support societal change, an endeavour advocated by scholars such as Watermeyer and Lewis (2018). Second, this study introduces methodological advancements by employing a multi-level, comparative case study design. This approach provides a significant framework for analysing intricate institutional dynamics that encompass individual, organizational, and systemic dimensions (Hyett et al., 2014). Third, the research aims to provide practical guidance by generating evidence-based insights that can inform university leaders, policymakers, and engaged scholars in their efforts to enhance their institutions' CE determinations through an endeavour grounded in the co-creation approaches outlined by Salmon et al. (2017). Ultimately, through cross-national comparisons, this study will elucidate how diverse policy frameworks and evaluation mechanisms affect engagement practices, thereby contributing to policy discussions aligned with evolving European priorities regarding research impact (Marino et al., 2019).

A relevant advantage of this methodological approach is its focus on triangulation across various data sources and levels of analysis, thereby reinforcing the credibility and robustness of its findings, as advocated by Baxter and Jack (2008). By situating CE within its broader systemic, institutional, and individual contexts, this research acknowledges the layered and interconnected nature of these practices.

The combined analysis of contextual factors, documentary evidence, and interviews with key informants will provide a comprehensive understanding of the environment in which CE activities occur. To fully understand the underlying mechanisms and construct a framework that effectively captures the perspectives of the actors involved, it is essential to consider both contextual and environmental factors (Stake, 1995). This framework will serve as the theoretical foundation for addressing the research questions, drawing on insights from key actors with significant roles in the university environment (Carter, 2020). It allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction among critical factors, such as funding availability, the prevailing culture of engagement, and the social and economic incentives for engagement, which influence the implementation of CE activities by scholars.

As mentioned, case study research has limitations, particularly concerning generalisability (Kennedy, 1979), particularly the potential for social desirability bias which may influence response validity and restrict broader applicability. Nevertheless, as Flyvbjerg (2006) contends, the richness and depth inherent in case studies yield substantial knowledge, even in the absence of statistical generalisability.

At a time when universities worldwide face increasing pressure to demonstrate their societal impact, understanding the factors that enable meaningful and transformative CE is more critical than ever. PLACES aims to contribute to this understanding by offering empirically grounded and theoretically sound insights into how universities can serve as catalysts for positive social change.

While acknowledging the inherent complexity involved in examining such multifaceted processes across diverse national contexts, we believe that the research design outlined in this paper provides a robust foundation for enhancing both theoretical and practical insights into transformative CE in higher education.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by PLACES - Portraits and Landscapes of Academic Community Engagement Scholarship, a MUR-PRIN 2022 project funded by the European Union - Next Generation EU, Mission 4 Component 1 CUP J53D23011320006, and B53D23019420006.

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This working paper outlines the methodological design employed by PLACES (*Portraits and Landscapes of Academic Community Engagement Scholarship*), a PRIN 2022 project, that investigates science-society interactions through Community Engagement (CE) initiatives in higher education institutions across Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. Drawing on a multiple case study methodology, this project aims to explore how and why universities engage with their communities and examines the conditions that enable or constrain such initiatives and their transformative potential. PLACES integrates *macro*-, *meso*-, and *micro*-levels of analysis across three countries to address the complexity and context-dependency of CE practices, encompassing policy and systemic frameworks, institutional practices, and individual scholars' experiences. By investigating diverse institutional contexts and drawing from a combination of data sources including policy documents, quantitative indicators, and qualitative interviews, the project employs data triangulation to provide an in-depth investigation of the object of study. The cases selected by this study reflect different academic traditions and administrative models, offering a foundation for cross-national comparisons. Ultimately, by studying situated CE initiatives within broader systemic and institutional contexts, PLACES seeks to provide evidence-based insights for university managers, policymakers, and scholars and contributes to the ongoing debate on the role of universities as active agents of societal change in an evolving higher education landscape.